

CHAPTER III

A Brief Introduction to Thai-Burmese Relations

And the Issue of Refugees

Since the post-World War II period and perhaps prior, the Thai government practiced an unofficial policy along its borders of buffer state security characterized by the use of external elements to act as a first line of defense. This was a historical strategy whereas the Thai kings established a system of vassal states to protect them from invading enemies.¹ This strategy later re-emerged during the war in Indochina and with problems on the western frontier. On the Cambodian border it was the anti-Heng Samrin/Vietnam resistance groups. On the Lao, it was the Hmong. And on the Burmese border it was the ethnic minorities, the KMT's 93rd Battalion and political dissidents. Being preoccupied by this threat, the neighboring countries would not be able to launch an offensive or come into direct dispute with the Thai and thus restored a balance of power to the Thai borders. This was also an effective means of managing undefined borders. Because in pre-colonial times, Thailand, and indeed, much of Southeast Asia did not have strictly demarcated borders, tension was likely to occur along the undefined new frontiers as states developed and expanded in the process of state building. A buffer zone could be used as a no-man's land lying between the two states' respective territory.

¹Alagappa, Muthiah. *The National Security of Developing States: Lessons from Thailand*. 1987. 57.

Before the British and French colonized much of mainland Southeast Asia, conflicts between regional powers were mainly over manpower, not so much territory. The majority of the area under control of kingdoms was inaccessible and useless except as a source of food and trade materials such as animal skins and other forest products. The control of manpower was, however, much more significant as rulers were able to develop the infrastructure of their administrative centers and extend their sphere of influence to neighboring lands.

When the colonial powers moved into the region with their rigid conceptualization of nation-states, they sought to define territorial sovereignty and draw lines on the map. King Mongkhut and King Chulalongkorn after him, recognizing the trend and wishing to avoid colonization, centralized power and informed the Europeans of the territory constituting Siam.

Initially, during the colonial times, there was no immediate threat in the border areas. If the British and French were going to expand into Thailand it would have been done via ship through Bangkok. The frontier was a harsh place for anyone, most particularly for European soldiers. It was the power vacuum created after the independence of its neighbors that Thailand needed to become concerned with its boundaries.

Diplomatic relations between Burma and Thailand were established in August 1948, the year of Burmese independence. The period of U Nu's premiership could best be characterized by religious and cultural communion, though it was not without conflict.

It was common knowledge that ethnic minority and Chinese nationalist forces used Thailand as a staging ground for exercises against mainland China and the Burmese in Shan State. During the 1950s, China engaged remnants of the Kuomintang in the Wa and Shan States forcing them to flee into Thailand where they were disarmed and kept in a refugee camp. The so-called KMT 93rd Army was then approached by the United States to collect intelligence and harry Chinese forces in Yunnan Province. On accepting the proposal, the nationalists were supplied with sophisticated American weapons and funding.

In March 1953, the Burmese Air Force, in a raid against Kuomintang troops in Shan State, bombed a Thai town in Mae Hong Son with attendant casualties and destruction of property.² Compounding the issue, Burmese Members of Parliament made inflammatory speeches concerning the incident.³ The Thai prime minister, Phibul Songkhram, responded by immediately reinforcing the border with heavy artillery pieces.

U Nu succeeded in ameliorating the conflict by apologizing and offering to pay compensation to the affected villagers. On passing through Bangkok on his way to the Bogor Conference in Sri Lanka, the Prime Minister met with Field Marshal Phibul and apologized for both recent and past transgressions against Thailand.⁴ The leaders then exchanged visits in 1955, Phibul visiting to officiate a ceremony for the Sixth Buddhist

²U Nu. *U Nu: Saturday's Son*. Yale University Press : New Haven and London. 1975. 270.

³Ibid.

⁴Butwell, Richard. *U Nu of Burma*. Stanford University Press : Stanford, California. 1963. 189.

Synod.⁵ Both countries waived claims of compensation in their new found friendship, Thailand's for the village bombing and Burma's for World War II damages, particularly the occupation of Keng Tung and Monsan. Cordial relations culminated in the signing, on October 15, 1956, of a treaty of peace and friendship between the two countries.

Their Royal Majesties of Thailand visited Burma from March 2-5, 1960, during the period when General Ne Win had assumed the reigns of power as a caretaker government. During the Royal Thai Goodwill visit, HM the King reportedly "made a personal friend, playing tennis in the evenings, with General Ne Win."⁶ In an unusual show of friendship between the two countries, when General Ne Win paid a visit to Thailand on December 14, 1962, he was received at Don Muang airport by HM the King.

When in 1962, Ne Win seized power from the civilian government and began his grand scheme of the Burmese Way to Socialism, the Thai became more suspicious, yet still friendly. Though Burma chose self-isolation and supposed neutrality, the leaders were nonetheless professing an ideology that the Thai would later adopt as the national enemy: communism. Cold war tension, coupled with Western warnings against the dangers of communism, led the Thai to perceive this ideology as the principal threat to the nation. Thailand was surrounded, and in fact infiltrated, by nations and persons hostile to its existence. It was during this period that the Thai-US policy of security buffers began in earnest.

⁵U Nu. 270.

⁶U Maung Maung, 1984. 21.

Thailand was threatened ever more directly by communist victories in Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos. Domestically, the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT), in their Third Congress, decided to take up arms against the central government from bases in the North and South and Thailand feared that they would one day link in a common front with the Communist Party of Burma (CPB), the biggest resistance army in that country. Malay separatists also joined in to create an ever more unstable situation. On the Cambodian border, the Thai utilized the anti-Vietnam/Heng Samrin forces; on the Lao, the armies of General Vang Pao; and on the Burmese, a mix of anti-Rangoon, anti-Communist armies plus the KMT's 93rd battalion. The security buffer policy was also an effective means of managing undefined borders. Because in pre-colonial times, Thailand, and indeed, much of Southeast Asia lacked clearly and thoroughly demarcated borders, tension was likely to occur along undefined frontiers as states developed and expanded in the process of state building.

In the 1970s, U Nu and his People's Democracy Party (PDP) and National United Liberation Front (NULF) moved to the Burmese security buffer and led a failed rebellion against Gen Ne Win from Thai soil.* U Nu had sought and received asylum in Thailand in 1969 and immediately formed the PDF. Initial backing for the PDP/NULF would appear to have come from the CIA.⁷ Nonetheless, during the late 1970s, after the apogee of the PDP passed with U Nu's departure from the political stage to Buddhist retreat in India, support for a Bo Mya-led KNU came from Bangkok

* The NULF was a non-communist umbrella group consisting of U Nu's PDP, the Karen National Union and the New Mon State Party.

⁷ Martin Smith. *Burma: Insurgency and the Politics of Ethnicity*. Zed Books. London and New Jersey. 1991. 277.

as the aforementioned link between the CPT and the CPB received more attention. The question of support for leadership by Bo Mya or Mahn Ba Zan was contested over affiliation with other anti-Rangoon groups, particularly, relations with the CPB.⁸ It was because the Thai did not want the two communist groups to link, that support went to Bo Mya, a staunch anti-Communist.⁹ Because of the dual threat of a Chinese supported CPB and a faltering socialist party in Burma which the Thai felt might give way to stronger communist powers, a suitable defense needed to be maintained. This was accomplished through the ethnic minorities.

The Burmese frequently complained of this unofficial security arrangement since before the time of U Nu. Rangoon saw the provision of asylum to those hostile to the regime as an immediate threat to its security. Accommodation and aid to the Kuomintang since the 1950s began a pattern that would continue throughout the years. In 1966, Thai Prime Minister Thanom visited Burma and promised to exercise more control over the activities of refugees.¹⁰ U Nu's operations chilled relations for four years until the ex-prime minister's departure. In 1973, Ne Win made another visit to Thailand as a guest of His Majesty the King and met with Prime Minister Kriangsak to discuss co-operation. Despite promises to the counter, activities of the ethnic minorities continued. When the Burmese Army drove into the Papun Hills, a number of Karen leaders and civilians fled across the border to the safety of Thailand. Both Thai Foreign Minister Upadit Pachariyangkun and Prime Minister Prem Tinasulanon were once again approached with the complaint of

⁸ Smith. 298.

⁹ Ibid. Mahn Ba Zan supported alliance "with any sympathetic, progressive revolutionary force, whether the peasantry, socialists, communists or patriotic bourgeoisie."

¹⁰ Phuankasem, Corrine. *Thailand's Foreign Relations, 1964-1980*. Institute of Southeast Asian Studies : Singapore. 1984. 22.

complicity with hostile elements during their visits to the Burmese capital, after which a number of measures were proposed including:

1. to repatriate or expel some of the rebel leaders;
2. to open an operations center to help (as well as control) some 6,000 Burmese refugees; and,
3. to give guidelines to governors of Thai border provinces to prevent any hostile activities by the refugees against their homeland government.¹¹

The majority of the Karen from this initial displacement returned to Karen National Union controlled areas in Burma. Some of the leaders, however, chose to set up homes on the Thai side and actually received citizenship under the Ministry of Interior Order for Registration of Burmese Displaced Persons of 1979 which allows displaced persons who entered Thailand before March 9, 1976 to apply for residence. Under this provision, if those persons wish to travel outside the village, district or province, they must contact officials at those respective levels.

Until 1983 - 1984, there were no significant changes in the buffer policy as the Burmese were largely confined to the Irrawaddy Delta. But during the aforementioned period they began finally to push to the border and Thai buffer policy began to show cracks.

In a report on a secret meeting in 1984, Squadron Leader Prasong Soonsiri, then head of the National Security Council, was said to have voiced a desire to change the Thai strategy as it caused friction between Thailand and Burma which he considered an important neighbor. Furthermore, he believed that the minorities were responsible for

¹¹ Ibid. 21.

among other things "growing of opium, trading in narcotics, destruction of forests and water sources."¹² The NSC chief was paraphrased as saying that:

...a group of officials had in the past been using the minority groups as buffers for security purposes and had used the KMT to help suppress communists for example. This belief is wrong and has affected the country adversely to a degree, he said, adding that the practice should be stopped totally in the future.¹³

Refugees also first began arriving in large numbers in 1984. This was when the Burmese Army's campaign began to significantly penetrate the ethnic minority zones, even up to the Thai-Burma border in some instances. This was as well the first time that primarily Christian affiliated non-governmental organizations became involved in providing regular humanitarian assistance to the camps. Thai policy at the time was to support refugee relief of a temporary nature with minimal participation and administration.

¹² Bangkok World. 24 April 1984.

¹³ Ibid.